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Reading, Writing, and Thinking for All

**Critical thinking, cultural awareness, impassioned writing.
These skills aren't just for the college bound.**

Mike Schmoker

Harvard president Derek Bok recently appeared on National Public Radio emphatically endorsing the value of a basic liberal arts education. Bok extolled such an education not only for its contribution to intellectual and personal growth, but also because a liberal arts education is “what employers are really asking for”:

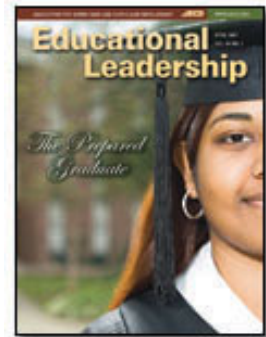
They feel that graduates don't write well enough, they don't think clearly enough, they don't have a good enough ethical sense, they don't understand the relationship of business to the larger social and public policy problems of the United States—they aren't globally aware. (Rehm, 2006)

Listening to Bok, I thought, aren't these the skills and dispositions we want all students to possess, whether or not they attend college? One recent study confirms that such skills are needed in 120 of the most common high-paying jobs and professions that *don't* require a college education (Olson, 2006). Moreover, a liberal arts education helps students develop judgment and confidence and equips them to more fully contribute to the world they live in.

But can we really hope to provide all students with an intellectually challenging education that fosters critical thinking, understanding of domestic and global realities, and exposure to important cultural touchstones? I believe we can. To see one curricular strategy for doing so, let's look at a high school in Arizona where a strong emphasis on reading and analyzing powerful texts provides students with world-class preparation.

A Charter Whose Choices Pay Off

Six years ago, Arizona administered the first version of its Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test. Initial scores were shockingly low—even at traditionally high-scoring schools. Curiously, at two schools, 100 percent of students passed all three portions of the test. One, predictably, was a magnet school that only enrolled high-achieving students. But the other school, Tempe Preparatory Academy, in suburban Phoenix, is an open-enrollment charter high school. Its student population is almost exclusively from middle- and lower-middle-class



April 2007

families; 15 percent of the students are nonwhite, and 5 percent are identified as having special needs. When Tempe Prep's success hit the newspapers, the number of students on its waiting list soared overnight.

Tempe Prep's students continue to score virtually 100 percent on all portions of the AIMS test. Their average SAT score is 1250. Why do students at Tempe Prep succeed academically? There is no question that the school attracts intelligent, industrious students from supportive families. But the explanation goes beyond this to a curricular choice Tempe Prep made. If other high schools followed suit, they too could provide a rigorous liberal arts education to all.

A Simple, Demanding Curriculum

From 9th through 12th grade, every student at Tempe Prep attends a daily two-hour Humane Letters block, which combines content from the areas of language arts and history. The curriculum of this course is stunningly simple: Students spend almost all of in-class time reading, writing, or discussing the issues they encounter in their readings. This emphasis on in-class reading, discussion, and writing is exactly what literacy experts like Richard Allington (2001) recommend for all schools, including—if not especially—high-poverty schools. But it's rare to see it in action.

The school makes its expectation for abundant amounts of reading, writing, and discussing—as well as assigned texts—clear to students, teachers, and parents. The assigned readings are almost exclusively classics that will broaden students' horizons and generate deep questions. For example, among the assigned texts in 9th grade are *Walden*, *Othello*, and *Our Town*. In 10th grade, students read *1984* and *Pride and Prejudice*; in 11th grade, the dialogues of Plato and Aristotle's *Poetics*; and in 12th grade, *Don Quixote* and writings by Karl Marx, among others. Some modern authors, such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, are also on the list.

By graduation, students have spent about 1,400 hours in these college-style seminars and have read and discussed thousands of pages of high-quality text. Students analyze and argue, agree or disagree with the ideas they encounter, and evaluate the ethics of various characters' actions. And—significantly—student work incorporates mastery of Arizona's standards for language arts: displaying logic and clarity, making inferences, doing character analysis, supporting one's arguments, synthesizing, evaluating, and discerning an author's bias or perspective.

But Tempe Prep's success is also a result of what they *don't* do. There is none of what Allington (2001) calls a "recitation script" that emphasizes "known-answer questions" (p. 88). Time isn't wasted on what he calls "stuff"—worksheets and assignments that can consume precious class time.

Rigor and focus are also part of the writing curriculum. Students write nine argumentative or thesis-driven essays every year, and they must revise each essay using the Six-Trait writing rubric (Culham, 2003). That's 36 multiple-draft essays by the end of high school. In addition, every student writes a 15- to 20-page thesis in his or her senior year, which the writer must defend to a panel of teachers and community members.

As William Fitzhugh (2006) observes, the opportunity to deeply explore an issue and write an extended essay about it is one of the quintessential intellectual experiences, important not only for preparation for college but also for success in innumerable lines of work.

The Centrality of Argumentative Literacy

Gerald Graff (2003) has called the kind of ability Tempe Prep nurtures in its students “argumentative literacy.” A recent study sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that argumentative literacy may be the most essential skill students need to succeed in college. The study's recurring theme is that students abandon college chiefly because K–12 education does not prepare them to think, read, and write argumentatively (Conley, 2003).

Being skilled in argument equips all students—college bound or not—to become intelligent, contributing employees and citizens. There is a strong convergence of opinion here. For Christopher Lasch (1995), learning to argue is “the essence of education,” which not only prepares us for every aspect of life and employment, but also “strengthens civil society” (p. 101). Gerald Graff (2003) estimates that only 20 percent of students are prepared for the argumentative culture of the university; he asserts that “argument literacy . . . is central to being educated” (p. 3).

Fostering Argument at View Park Preparatory

To see how these strategies work with students for whom pursuing a college education is far from a given, consider View Park Preparatory High School in Los Angeles. Ninety-eight percent of View Park's 375 students are black; half receive free or reduced-price lunch.

View Park uses a curricular approach similar to Tempe Prep's, with a focus on developing students' analytical and argumentative skills. From 9th through 12th grade, English instruction focuses almost exclusively on reading, argument, and persuasive writing. The curriculum is built around debating questions like this one connected to Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*: “Does McMurphy liberate or imprison his fellow patients in the ward?” Through such reflective questioning, teachers train students to back up any inference they make in their own writing or in discussions of literature. Students learn to use Stephen Toulmin's (1958) Model of Argumentation—which recognizes the four key elements of argument as claim, clarification, evidence, and warrant—to produce college-level written arguments.

View Park students not only outperformed their white peers in the district on the 2005 California English Language Arts Exam, but they also have the highest test scores among black high school students in California (Hernandez, Kaplan, & Schwartz, 2006).

Overcoming Obstacles

To implement curriculums that foster argumentative literacy, schools must overcome two crucial obstacles: “curricular chaos” and misconceptions about students' intellectual capabilities.

Curricular Chaos

Evidence suggests that a high-quality, common curriculum—including purposeful reading, writing, and discussion—is the most powerful factor that affects learning (Marzano, 2003). Unfortunately, in too many schools, curricular chaos prevails (Schmoker & Marzano, 1999).

For a time, my daughters attended secondary school at a highly touted preparatory academy. Ironically, this school did very little to prepare them as effective thinkers, readers, and writers because there was no set curriculum. Many classes relied on lectures, movies, and worksheets. Even in honors courses, assessment was rare, haphazard, and patently lower order. There were no school or department guidelines for what texts students should read or how many written assignments they should complete, and teachers did not use scoring guides to assess writing. One administrator admitted that after a full decade of existence, the one issue the school had not addressed was curriculum.

Schools don't have to mimic Tempe Prep's curriculum to ensure that students receive key intellectual preparation. But we must make sure that teachers explicitly define—and monitor—what students will learn, which texts they must read, which scoring guides they should follow, and how many written assignments they must complete.

Administrators must also audit the curriculum by meeting with teacher teams each quarter to review which standards teachers covered and to examine the results of common assessments. We must conduct occasional, unannounced classroom walkthroughs, followed by reports to the faculty on whether instruction is adhering to the established curriculum—or whether “stuff” is supplanting the necessary reading, writing, and debating.

“Students Aren't Up to It”

The second obstacle to implementing a powerful curriculum is the misconception that some students—particularly the non-college-bound—aren't capable of a more intellectually viable curriculum or would find it boring. Not so. John Goodlad's studies in the early 1980s, based on visits to more than 1,000 classrooms in seven regions of the United States, revealed that language arts as traditionally taught has usually been students' least favorite class. But when the curriculum centers around reading, writing, and discussion as catalysts for inquiry, language arts becomes students' favorite class (Goodlad, 1984; Marino, 1998).

Creating Catalysts for Inquiry

Virtually all courses can become catalysts for inquiry—and a means to teach the skills that the future demands of all students—when we build the curriculum around good questions. Success relies on these elements: a good text (a section in a textbook, an article, or a book chapter); a provocative question; and a structured way for students to respond in written and oral form. In choosing texts, look for high-quality fiction and nonfiction that are likely to provoke strong opinions and varied interpretations, such as two texts in which the authors present opposing views, and ask students to write a synthesis defending or criticizing one of these views, referencing evidence from both texts.

Teachers need to spend planning time with their colleagues to develop questions and

prereading prompts that will spur inquiry, meaty discussion, and high-quality writing. Certain types of questioning work best in this regard: asking students to compare and contrast; defend a position; or rank a list of historical people or events from most to least influential, providing justification from key readings. Teachers can refine generative questions such as these to work at many grade levels: In the folk tale “Hungry Spider and the Turtle,” who would make a better friend—Spider or Turtle? (for 1st graders). Is Zeus just? Was it wise for the United States to enter World War I?¹

The best prompts and questions will be generated through collaboration. The most stimulating questions can be used in various forms throughout a class or a whole school. Teachers at Tempe Prep are continually refining the questions they use in Humane Letters.

The Proof: High-Quality Work

Like all students, reluctant readers in high-poverty schools are eager to discuss and argue from the moment they learn to decode even very simple texts. In the white heat of argument, students learn to organize their interpretations into a persuasive essay. This consistently leads to polished, passionate written work. The proof that this approach is worth the effort is found not only in the fact that Tempe Prep students name Humane Letters as their favorite class, but also in the thinking and writing they produce.

There is nothing complicated about the way that students at schools like Tempe Prep and Park View acquire an education that sharpens their critical-thinking and writing skills for life. It's time we realized that teachers can adapt this approach to prepare all kinds of students in any kind of school for full engagement with their world, while demonstrating that, in Ted Sizer's words, “We don't know the half of what these kids can do.”

Endnote

¹ For a list of suggested generative questions in various content areas, see Appendix A of my book *Results Now* (ASCD, 2006).

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